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ABSTRACT

To investigate coverage by the "Washington Post Magazine" of Blacks--before, during, and after the 1986 protests of the magazine's perceived anti-black tone--a study examined copies of the "Post" magazine from May 4, 1986, to April 26, 1987. Both photographs and editorial texts were considered, and coding was done by race: White, Black, other or mixed. Within each category, subcoding was done to determine whether the item was positive, neutral or negative. The results were tabulated and graphed by issue and by four-month period: pre-protest (May through August 1986), Protest (September through December 1986) and post-protest (January through April 1987). Findings indicated that the "Post" provided little neutral or positive coverage of Blacks in the four months before the 1986 protest. Coverage of Blacks became fuller and more positive during the protest, and remained positive and increased further after the protest. During the final four months, coverage of Blacks rose to near parity with the percentage of Blacks in the metropolitan population, and coverage was noticeably more positive. Photographs and illustrations, however, have not reflected the changes made in editorial coverage, and Blacks are still noticeably absent from ads, as well. (ARH)

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PROTEST AT THE POST:
Coverage of Blacks in The Washington Post Magazine

by

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On September 7, 1986, The Washington Post proudly unveiled its redesigned Sunday Magazine. The Post had spent nearly a year and a half and $10 million converting to the slick magazine-size format,[1] but no one on the staff was prepared for the reaction the debut would prompt. During the next four months, the magazine became a target of heated protest by local blacks, who held rallies and deposited tens of thousands of copies of the magazine on the steps of the Post each week.[2]

The protest centered on what many blacks felt was a clearly anti-black tone to the debut issue of the redesigned magazine:

* The cover article focused on a black rap musician accused of murdering a drug dealer.

* Columnist Richard Cohen wrote about a local merchant who had called police when two well-dressed black men entered the store. Cohen wrote that he would likely do the same thing.

* A photo "portrait" of Sugar Ray Leonard featured only his upraised fist.

* No blacks were featured elsewhere in the magazine, even in the ads.

Taken as a whole, the view from the Post magazine seemed to be that blacks are violent, criminal people far different from the affluent whites sought by the magazine's advertisers.[3]

The Post crisis came a little more than a decade after the Post had been hit with a complaint to the EEOC over lack of hiring and promotion of blacks. Recalling that incident, editor Ben Bradlee reflected, "We were ignorant before, which you could call a form of racism, but we're not now."[4]

But that same ignorance seemed manifest once again with the debut of the new magazine. Bradlee explained away the contents of the first issue of the magazine by noting that when a scheduled cover feature on Vice President George Bush fell through, the cover candidates were the murder story, a story on the Beltway, or one on a Pennsylvania congressman. "Neither [of the latter two] seemed right for the cover," he wrote.[5] Earlier he had noted, "This newspaper is proud of its long track record on civil liberties, and the magazine will reflect that pride."[6]

A little more than a month after the debut issue, Bradlee gave the protesters the apology they had been demanding. But even his apology showed that Bradlee felt no real wrong had been committed: "[I want] to apologize for offense that two articles in our first issue plainly -- if inadvertently -- gave to certain segments of our audience," he wrote.[7]

This study was designed to investigate whether the coverage and tone of that notorious issue were indeed due to coincidence, or whether the contents were similar to recent Post magazine coverage of blacks, who make up 70 percent of the population of the city whose name the Post bears, and nearly 30 percent of the entire metropolitan area.[8]

All 52 issues of the Post's Sunday magazine from May 1986 through April 1987 were examined to determine the amount and type of coverage given to blacks, as well as subtleties that make even race-neutral stories appear anti- or non-black. Of particular interest is whether coverage in the magazine changed after the protest. Because my primary concern was the content to which readers were reacting, it was not necessary to study a longer time period.

Theoretical Framework

In Building a Theory of News Content, Shoemaker and Mayfield draw on Altschull's work to posit that media content is determined not merely by those

who own the media, but by all those who support it financially. For commercial media in the United States, ideological influences are therefore exerted by advertisers and audiences in addition to owners. Such influences will not be homogenous nor equally strong: "content will reflect the strongest ideological position, but its influence will be mediated by the other ideological positions."[9] But, the authors note, "Media vehicles will change their formats or content in response to audience or advertiser interests." [10]

If this theory holds, then two hypotheses should be supported about the content of the Post magazine:

1) Before the protest, content should be predominantly white-oriented, because the major ideological influence was that of advertisers courting affluent readers, most of whom are white suburbanites.

2) After the protest, the magazine should have a higher proportion of coverage of blacks, and a larger share of that coverage should be positive.

Literature Review

No study has focused on changes in media coverage as a response to minority reader protests, but several studies point to a long trend of neglect and negative coverage of blacks. In the earliest, Simpson found that less than 2 percent of the news in Philadelphia papers between 1908 and 1932 was devoted to coverage of blacks. Of that amount, between 52 percent and 74 percent of the coverage was of crimes blacks had committed.[11] Gist found similar results in his study of 17 major newspapers from 1928 to 1929; 47 percent of news of blacks concerned anti-social behavior.[12]

In her study of coverage in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch between 1920 and 1950, Beatty-Brown found that even in that paper — which she judged unique in its fairness and sympathy — news about blacks appeared infrequently.[13]

Johnson studied black news in Oregon papers from 1931 to 1945, and found that the publications covered only black crime, entertainment figures and sports personalities, with no news on black advances.[14]

Latta reviewed the Wichita Eagle during six months in 1968 and found that quantity and quality of the coverage was inadequate, with the paper failing to report on serious social, economic and political problems affecting the city's black population.[15]

Tatro's study of five deep South newspapers in 1950 and 1970 revealed no change in the frequency of items about local blacks, but found that news about black crime decreased from 50 percent of the coverage to 24 percent.[16]

In their study of coverage in The Los Angeles Times between 1940 and 1966, Johnson, Sears and McConahay found that coverage of blacks failed to keep pace with growth in the black population — except during conflicts — and helped perpetuate black invisibility.[17]

Secrest found that in San Francisco papers between 1954 and 1964, blacks seldom appeared except as criminals or as spokesmen for race reform groups — which many regarded as the same thing.[18]

In his study of desegregation content of selected North Carolina newspapers, Carter found mixed results: While blacks rarely were news sources, there were few stereotypes of blacks, and the papers showed a fair amount of coverage of and tendency to support integration.[19]

Martindale studied four geographically diverse prestige newspapers during segments of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. She found that all four provided more coverage of blacks during the '70s than the '50s, and a greatly increased percentage of each paper's total coverage of blacks dealt with everyday life. All but one showed an increase in coverage of problems, too. But three of the papers increased stereotypical coverage — crime and entertainment — during the 1970s, leading to the conclusion that many more improvements are needed.[20]

Chaudhary studied newspaper coverage of black public officials in 19 cities during political campaigns between 1970 and 1977, and found that while stories on black elected officials were slightly longer than stories on whites, they were also less favorably displayed and the content was less positive.[21]

In her study of coverage in Life magazine from 1937 to 1972, Sentman found no linear increase in coverage of blacks over time, with the magazine's maximum coverage of blacks peaking at only 2.7 percent (during 1972). Sentman also found that portrayals of blacks in everyday life peaked at 0.1 percent of total coverage in 1937.[22]

Research Questions

Three research questions were asked in studying coverage of blacks in the Post magazine:

1) Was the coverage in the first issue of the new magazine representative of previous coverage?

If, as Ben Bradlee claimed, the convergence of materials in the debut issue was merely an unfortunate coincidence, perhaps the protest was an uncalled for overreaction. But if the format change served to spotlight a recent pattern of bias and neglect in one of the world's leading newspapers, then the protest served to make the Post take a long-overdue accounting of its policies.

2) Did substantial changes in coverage occur after the protest?

The answer to this question hinges in part on the answer to Question 1 as to whether the coverage in the debut issue of the new magazine was representative. If so, according to Shoemaker and Mayfield's theory, the protest should have led to a change in coverage.

3) If so, were the changes upheld after the protest?

If the Post magazine had a long pattern of neglect and negativity toward blacks, it is likely that content would slip back into that pattern once the protest tapered off.

Method

Copies of the Post magazine were examined from May 4, 1986, to April 26, 1987. All editorial matter was coded except bridge and chess columns (which appeared prior to September 1986 only), crossword puzzles and tables of contents. Beginning with September 1986, tables of contents included a photo; this was coded. Front covers were coded. Ads were not coded, but were observed.

The unit of analysis was the column. Beginning with September 1986, the magazine changed to a consistent three-column format. Before that date, various numbers of columns were used. For standardization, all earlier issues were converted to three-column equivalency. Coding by column ignores the difference in page size between the old magazine and the new (the new is smaller), but for a comparison of relative proportions, this is not an important distinction.

Other units of analysis were considered but dismissed. Stories, for instance, were not considered a good measure because of the variablity in what constitutes a story: How can a half-column "up-front" item be compared to a 10-page cover story? The main concern was actual volume, and columns proved to be the most helpful unit of analysis for this determination. (Pages could also have been used and, in fact, column totals can easily be converted into page totals simply by dividing column totals by three.)

Photographs were coded, generally given the same status as the articles they accompanied. In cases of clear distinction between editorial and photographic representation, though, photos were coded in different categories.

Coding was done by race. If an item referred to a person or persons who were clearly identifiable by race, it was coded accordingly: White, Black, Other or Mixed. Within each category, subcoding was done to determine whether the item was Positive, Neutral or Negative.

When the race of subjects was not readily apparent or when the item did not concern people, it was coded as Race Neutral. A large percentage of regular features — the restaurant review, and wine, Personal Tech and auto columns, for instance — fell into this category. When editorial matter fell into the Race Neutral category but accompanying photos or illustrations showed people who clearly belonged to a specific race, the artwork was coded Race Neutral, but a note was made of its racial orientation. Fashion spreads, for instance, typically dealt with clothing, and were coded Race Neutral. But notice was taken of the race of models in the photos.

Because negative microfilm was used for several issues of the magazine, determinations of race in some illustrations and photos was difficult if not impossible. I estimate the proportion of such instances at well under 1 percent, however, so the effect on final results is insignificant.

Once all coding was done, the results were tabulated and graphed by issue and by four-month period: Pre-Protest (May through August 1986), Protest (September through December 1986) and Post-Protest (January through April 1987).

Findings

The numbers of columns per week devoted to whites and blacks is graphed in Figure 1, which clearly indicates a strong bias toward whites, with coverage of blacks becoming commonplace only well after the protest began.

Figures 2 and 3 break down the weekly data by Black and White Positive, Negative and Neutral categories. Figure 2 is noteworthy in that it indicates an increase in White Negative coverage during and shortly after the protest. Figure

3 shows little coverage of blacks before the protest — and what there was is generally Negative — as well as a marked increase in coverage of blacks after the protest, with no Negative coverage during that period.

Figure 4 summarizes percentages of coverage for the three four-month periods under study. White coverage dropped slightly during the protest period, from 25.7 percent of total to 24.5 percent, but rose to a high of 29.1 percent during the post-protest period. Negative coverage of whites peaked at 4.7 percent during the protest period.

Black coverage rose from 4.5 percent before the protest to 7.7 percent during the protest and 11.6 percent afterward. More significantly, nearly 65 percent of black coverage was Negative before the protest, but there was no Negative black coverage after the protest. (The only Negative coverage during the protest period was found in the debut issue).

The ratio of all coverage of whites to blacks before the protest was 5.7 to 1. After the protest, the ratio was 2.5 to 1. The ratio of whites to blacks in the metropolitan Washington population is nearly identical to the latter figure: 2.43 to 1.

Conclusions

This study indicates that The Washington Post Magazine provided little neutral or positive coverage of blacks in the four months before the 1986 protest, thereby setting the stage for that protest. Coverage of blacks became fuller and more positive during the protest, and remained positive and increased further after the protest. Because of the long lead time in preparing magazines, it is reasonable to assume that any editorial changes made in response to the protest would appear only during the post-protest period.

During those final four months, coverage of blacks rose to near parity with the percentage of blacks in the metropolitan population, and coverage was noticably more positive.

The data do not reflect the ratios of blacks to whites in ads or in illustrations and photographs used with Non-racial articles. While there have been gains in both areas, photographs and illustrations do not reflect the changes made in editorial coverage.

For example, while black and Oriental models have begun to appear in fashion spreads, the overwhelming majority of fashion models are white. In the March 8, 1987, issue of the magazine, for example, the cover and 17 inside pages were devoted to a fashion spread. None of the fashions were modeled by non-whites.

Blacks are still noticably absent from ads, as well. While some of the larger department stores made efforts to feature blacks during the protest period, during the final four months studied blacks rarely appeared in ads except public service ads for high blood pressure and similar causes.

Two conclusions stand out. First, biased and deficient coverage still exists in the media, even among the most prestigious and enlightened outlets and even though it has been two decades since the Kerner Commission chided the press for reporting and writing "from the standpoint of a white man's world."[23] Blacks interviewed at the time of the report saw the media as "instruments of the white power structure." "They thought that these white interests guide the entire white community, from the journalists' friends and neighbors to city officials, police officers, and department store owners. Publishers and editors, if not white reporters, supported and defended these interests with enthusiasm and dedication."[24] It has even been suggested that in the current political climate and in the absence of a national press watchdog, the media may be backsliding.

Second, despite long-time assumptions and assurances, this case makes it clear that the business and editorial sides of the media are intimately linked: Editorial coverage can be changed with the efforts of those who hold the media's

purse strings. That the Post protest was able to overcome powerful structural biases is rather amazing and lends support to Shoemaker and Mayfield's theory.

Obviously, it will be useful to look at the magazine in another year, or another decade, to study its long-term coverage of blacks. And it would also seem a good idea to look longer into the past to study previous patterns of coverage. Finally, it would be interesting to study similar audience protests and compare the outcomes to try to determine exactly what kind of actions are most likely to influence coverage.

Notes

[1] Jim Watson, "Protest: D.C.'s Black Community Says 'Take It Back', The Washington Times, 22 September 1986, p. M4.

[2] Joyce Price, "Protests by D.C. Blacks Seen as New, Stick-to-it Activism," The Washington Times, 10 November 1986, p. 5B.

[3] John Ward Anderson, "New Post Magazine Draws Protest," The Washington Post, 13 September 1986, p.D3a.

[4] Nick Kotz, "The Minority Struggle for a Place in the Newsroom," Columbia Journalism Review, March/April 1979, p. 27.

[5] "F.Y.I.: The Washington Post Magazine," The Washington Post, 5 October 1986, p. C7b.

[6] Anderson, p. D3a.

[7] Bradlee, p. C7b.

[8] Diane Granat, Paul Hathaway, William Saletan, and John Sansang, "Blacks and Whites in Washington: How Separate, How Equal?" Washingtonian, October 1986, p. 156.

[9] Pamela J. Shoemaker with Elizabeth Kay Mayfield, Building a Theory of News Content: A synthesis of current approaches (Columbia, SC: AEJMC, 1987), p. 24.

[10] Shoemaker, p. 25.

[11] George E. Simpson, The Negro in the Philadelphia Press (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1936).

[12] Noel P. Gist, "The Negro in the Daily Press," Social Forces, 10:3, pp. 406-11.

[13] Florence Rebekah Beatty-Brown, The Negro as Portrayed by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch from 1920 to 1950, disseration, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1951.

[14] Clifford F. Johnson, An Analysis of Negro News and Non-news Matters Appearing in Four Oregon Daily Newspapers During 1931, 1936, 1946 and 1948, master's thesis, University of Oregon, 1949.

[15] Robert Latta, A Content Analysis of News of Black Americans as presented by the Wichita Eagle and a Comparison with Empirical Data, thesis, Kansas State University, 1970.

[16] Helen Louise Tatro, Local News Coverage of Blacks in Five Deep South Newspapers, thesis, Indiana University, 1972.

[17] Paula B. Johnson, David O. Sears, and John B. McConahay, "Black Invisibility, the Press and the Los Angeles Riot," American Journal of Sociology, 76:4, p. 707, 712.

[18] Andrew Secrest, In Black and White: Press opinion and race relations in South Carolina, 1954-1964, dissertation, Duke University, 1972.

[19] R.E. Carter Jr., "Segregation and the News: A regional content study," Journalism Quarterly, 34:1, pp. 3-18.

[20] Carolyn Martindale, The White Press and Black America (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1986).

[21] Anju G. Chaudhary, "Press Portrayal of Black Officials," Journalism Quarterly, 57:4, pp. 636-46.

[22] Mary Alice Sentman, "Black and White: Disparity in coverage by Life magazine from 1937 to 1972," Journalism Quarterly, 60:3, pp. 501-508.

[23] Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (New York: Bantam Books, 1968), p. 366.

[24] Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, pp. 374-5.

FIGURE 1

Columns of Coverage, by Week

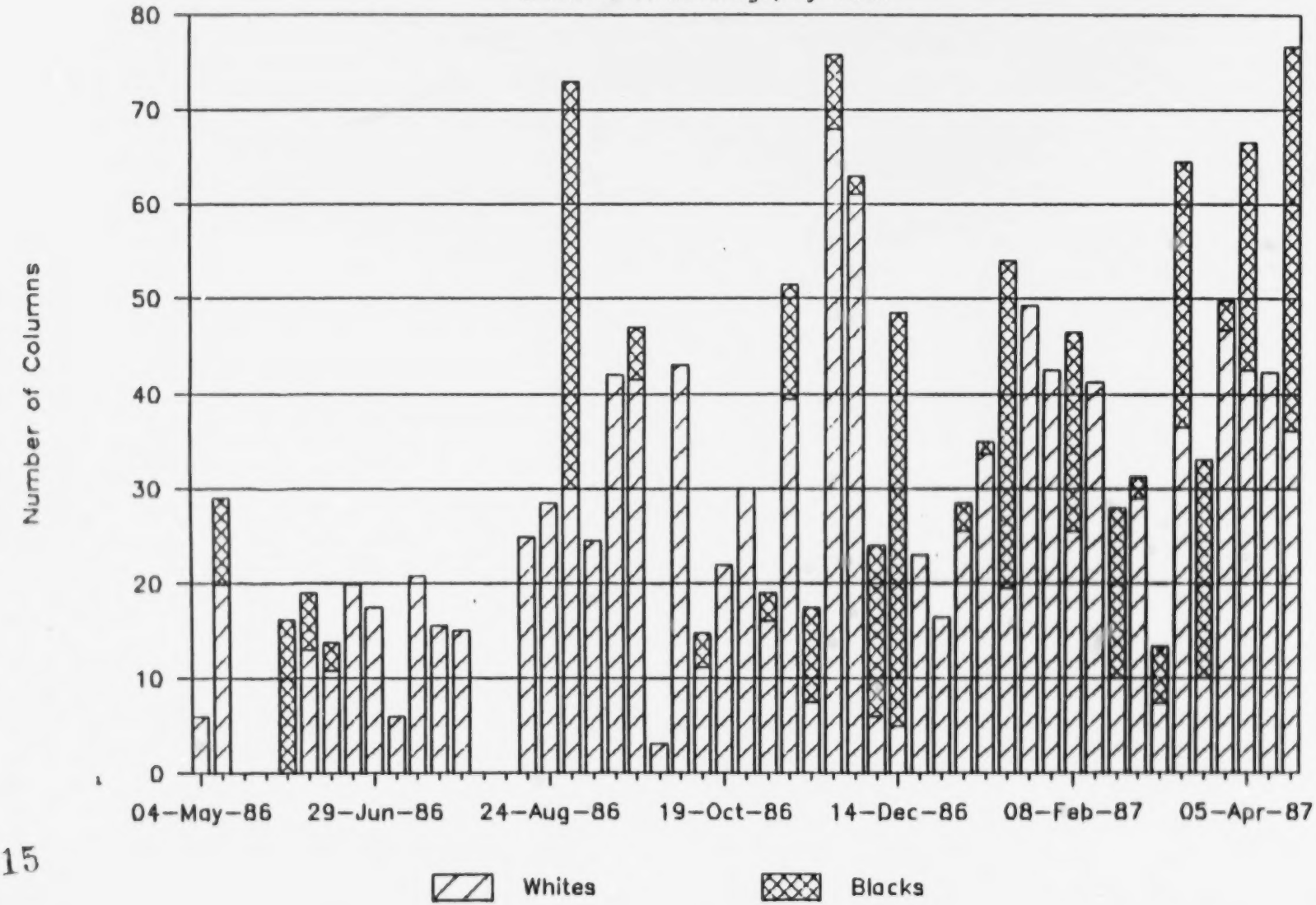

FIGURE 2

Coverage of Whites

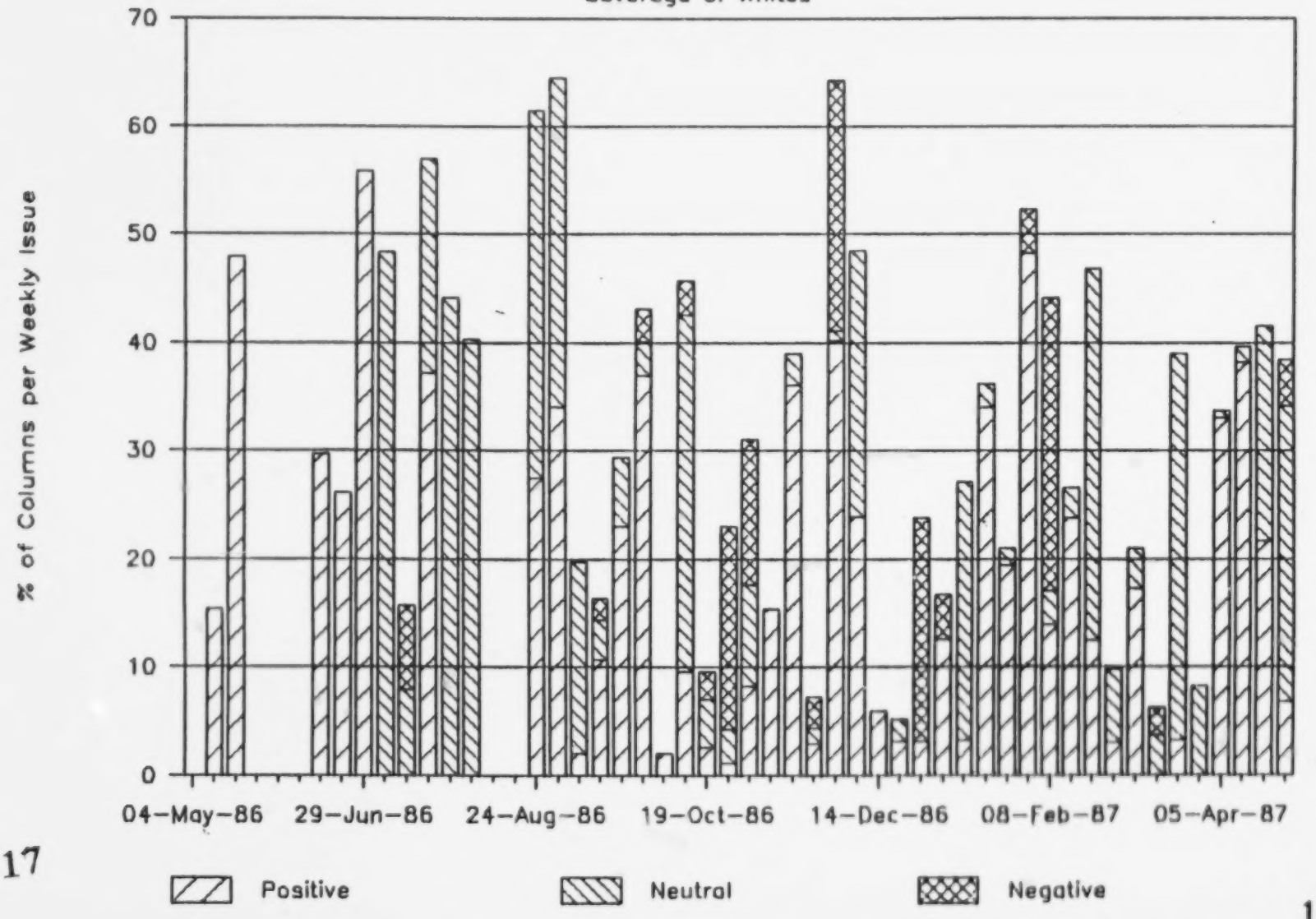

FIGURE 3

Coverage of Blacks

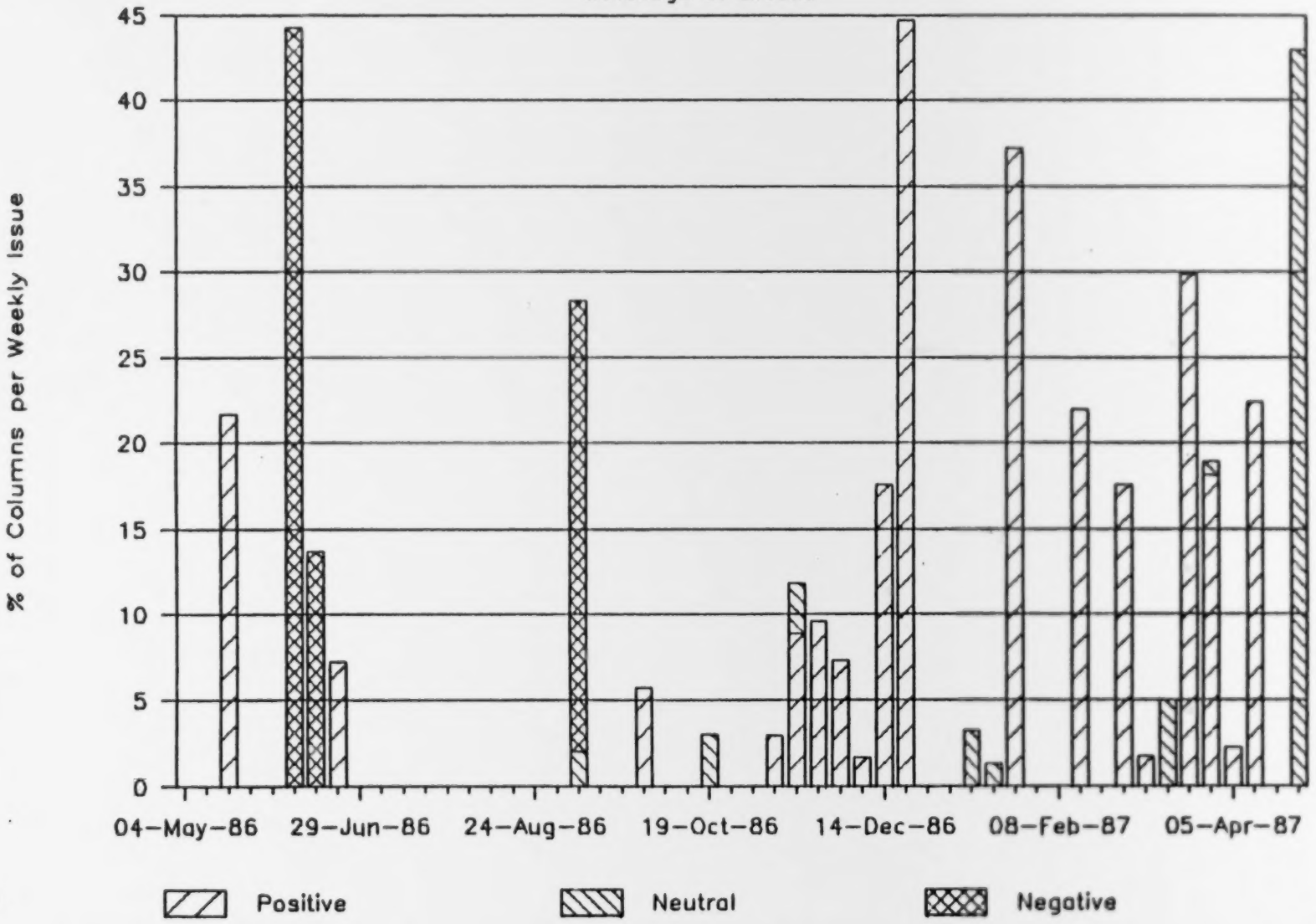

FIGURE 4

Coverage by 4–Month Period